



ICE STORM 2003

Kentucky Division of Forestry



The Impact on Wildlife

The record-setting ice storm of February 2003 damaged thousands of acres of forests throughout central and northeastern Kentucky. The impacts of this storm will be felt for many years and in many ways. Despite the terrible economic impact on forest landowners and local communities, the ice may actually be of benefit to some wildlife species.

The storm's impact on wildlife populations depends upon the duration of the storm, air temperatures before and after the storm and the physical condition of wildlife when the storm hit. The storm was relatively short in duration, and much of the ice melted fairly soon after the storm. Most wildlife populations were able to cope with the storm and any direct, lasting negative impacts were likely minimal. The impacts of the storm on the landscape varied considerably across the area, and a diversity of habitat conditions for wildlife will likely result. In many places there will be new growth on the forest floor and the patchy effects of the ice on forest stands may create a mosaic of habitat types. In addition, opportunities have been created to utilize forest management practices to enhance or create wildlife habitat as a result of the storm.

Benefits to Wildlife from the Ice Storm

Food. A "natural" thinning of trees has occurred in some areas that may enable nut producers such as oak to produce more nuts over time. Acorns are choice food for deer, blue jays, wild turkey, wood ducks, etc. Berries, wildflowers, shrubs and forbs will flourish in areas where fallen trees have exposed the ground to sunlight, creating another food source.

Homes. Breakage on a tree can serve as an entry point for decay and insect damage from which cavities will develop over time. These new cavities will create nesting sites for woodpeckers, chickadees and

nuthatches, or dens for raccoons and squirrels. Some predator species, such as owls and hawks, will find better perch or nest sites in the tops of trees where branches or the main stem have broken off.

Cover. Many animals, such as reptiles, amphibians and small mammals, use large diameter woody debris that has fallen on the forest floor. This debris provides refuge and safe escape cover from predators. Loosened bark plates can potentially become excellent nesting and roosting sites for some species of birds and bats.

How the Storm Affected Groups of Animals

Resident songbirds and most game birds probably had a tough time finding food during and after the storm, as much of their food supply was encased in ice.

Small mammals should have been able to move along on the icy crust and chew through the ice to reach buds and winter fruits. Some mammals have stockpiled food and can remain beneath ice or snow cover for extended periods, out of reach of predators.

Large mammals such as deer most likely experienced only a temporary inconvenience.

Small predators, such as weasels and foxes that feed on mice may have had a difficult time finding their prey amid the ice and fallen debris.

Large predators, such as coyotes and bobcats, likely had little difficulty with the ice.

What You Can Do to Help Wildlife During and After Storms

- ◆ Keep bird feeders full and ice-free when food supplies may be limited.
- ◆ Leave some fallen woody debris throughout the forest, provided it does not create a safety hazard. This is actually better for wildlife than cleaning up the woods too much. More wood on the forest floor creates an important source of ground cover for many wildlife species.
- ◆ In the aftermath of the storm, look for opportunities to enhance wildlife habitat through forest management practices. For example, small gaps in the forest canopy created by the storm may provide an opportunity to enlarge openings that encourage regeneration of grasses, forbs, shrubs and trees that enhance wildlife habitat diversity.
- ◆ Enjoy wildlife! Get outdoors and observe wildlife (from a safe distance of course). Contact the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources and the Kentucky Division of Forestry for specific information about wildlife programs and wildlife habitat management in Kentucky.

Acknowledgments: The Kentucky Division of Forestry appreciates the use of the format and much of the text developed by the USDA Forest Service in Durham, New Hampshire, and the review by Dr. Ron Masters, OSU Extension Wildlife Specialist. Stillwater, Oklahoma.

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